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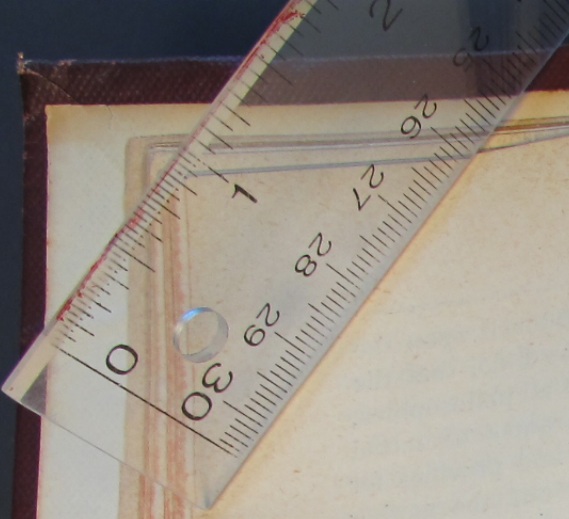
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HINTS TO YOUNG PIANO-TEACHERS.

BY A FOREIGNER.

IN the twenty-four years I have been teaching Music in England, and during which I have had pupils under my tuition from all parts of England, Scotland and Wales, I have been struck again and again by the way these pupils had been grounded, or rather, by the way their first instructions in the art of Music had been carried on; for I may safely say, that at least nine out of every ten had never been grounded at all, and even though they had been learning Music for a considerable time, they were totally ignorant of the very elements of it.

Now, this seems very strange in a country where, as in England, Music is so much thought of, and naturally leads to the question: "What is the reason?"

I have been pondering this question for some time and think it can be answered to this effect; that in almost every single case an inferior and inexperienced teacher has been procured for the beginner. Parents are so apt to say: "So-and-so will be quite sufficient for the beginning, it is no good having expensive lessons for one so young,"—and there the first mischief is done. The young nursery-governess, or perhaps an elder sister or aunt, even the mother herself, set about teaching the young pupil, although they mostly have no idea of and no experience in teaching; but they can play a few pieces themselves to the apparent delight of a drawing-room audience; why then, should they not be able to teach?

If I were to enumerate all the faults committed in this teaching, their number would be legion, and I will therefore limit myself to pointing out some of the most frequent, the most startling and the most distressing in their consequences,

in the hope that these lines will serve as a warning and a useful hint to young teachers.

The first fault, which is almost invariably committed, is to let the pupil put his fingers on the keys anyhow, as long as he can produce a sound. The hands lie mostly flat on the keys, and the striking is performed by a pushing of the fingers somewhere up between the black keys and a dragging of them down again, ready for the next push. I need not say what an ugly, hard, disconnected sound these repeated pushes produce, how different from the proper way of "striking" a key with the tip of the finger; the white key somewhere about the middle of its lower part, the black key near the edge. No finger ought to touch a key unless when striking it, the unoccupied fingers resting about an inch above the keys in a curved position; and from this position it is that every key should be struck. The pupil's attention ought to be drawn to the unequal length of his fingers, to show him the necessity of bending them and thus bringing them on a line. Of course I am speaking here of the five-finger exercises, which should always be the first and for a prolonged time the only things attempted by a beginner, and this leads on to the second great fault so often met with, the playing of scales before any attempt has been made to train the fingers in the right way. A beginner should not play anything in which he has to pass his fingers under or over for at least a year, and for more than that, if the pupil be very young or slow. There should be preparatory exercises for the scales, in which great care is taken that the passing of the thumb under and the second or third finger over is done in the right way. The fingers should make the curve mentioned above, and thus form a passage for the thumb to enter without interfering with any of the other fingers, without a jerk of the hand or elbow so frequently seen, and which is always accompanied by a break in the continuity of sound. And here we have arrived at another fault, which, however, naturally springs from the wrong touch, the neglect of the Legato. The pupils are very scarce indeed who can play a scale in a smooth, well-connected style, one note as long and as loud as another, with an imperceptible passing over and under, a correct fingering and a quiet arm. It is mostly a rattle, with plenty of elbow, and a touch somewhat between

the Legato and Staccato; for the latter, correctly performed, is just as rare as the good Legato. The reason for this is, as I stated before, that insufficient time is given to the training of the fingers, before scales, etc., are attempted. And why this impatience, why this hurry, to let the pupil do things that he ought not to do yet? I am sorry to say that one of the great reasons is, that mothers and teachers are too fond of showing off their children before they can play anything worth hearing. The poor little victims have to strum a little tune to admiring visitors, who, of course, declare themselves quite astonished at the cleverness of the young hopeful, although their real opinion may be quite a different one. Poor, proud mother! Little you know how by this premature showing-off you work against the real, solid progress of your little one! The training of the fingers must be done slowly and gradually while they are young and flexible. They are very rare cases indeed where this neglect is made good in later years. When the fingers have grown to a certain degree, they get stiff and unmanageable, and it requires an immense deal of patience and perseverance on the part both of pupil and teacher to overcome the difficulties.

This showing-off is also one of the causes why children so often are made to play by heart before they even know their notes, and this starts another most important subject, another fault committed, another stumbling-block put in the way of the young learner.

The system of most young instructors in teaching the notes consists of impressing the pupil with the fact that the notes on the five lines are E G B D and F, and those in the four spaces spell the word "face"—F A C E. Beyond this there is no attempt made, unless it be the C and D below the stave or the G above. The result of this teaching is mostly a hopeless muddle as to which is the G, which the B, and so on; and as this guessing at the notes would take too much time at lessons, the teacher shortens the process by telling the pupil every note he has to play, and by this prevents him from ever after being able to read music. At least, this is the only explanation I can find for the fact that hardly one in a hundred can play music at first sight, and I was confirmed in my opinion when I once got a first instruction-book into my hand, where, under every note was printed, very big, the

letter it represented, so that the poor little brain should not have to be troubled at all with learning notes. Also, I have had in my hand music-books where the teacher had put the name under the notes in pencil, a thing I should never do under any condition. My principle is never to let the pupil play anything he cannot read himself; it is slow work and requires great patience, but it is safe and makes good readers.

A lady to whom I had given her first instructions in music when a child, and who was afterwards for two years a pupil of Madame Schumann, once had occasion to accompany one of Schubert's songs, which she had not known before, in the presence of Sir George Grove. When she had finished he exclaimed: "Where have you learned to read like this? not in England?" Is not this very telling?

My system of teaching the notes is to begin with three C's, the middle C on the piano and the two above it, which three C's I let the pupil find on the piano too. Then follow the three D's next to them, then the E's, and so on. When it comes to G, A, and B, I begin with those below the middle C, and I find that with a child of ordinary intelligence it takes a month or two to know the treble notes through three octaves. But a part of the lesson has to be given up to questioning on them for some time longer. As soon as the treble notes have taken firm root I begin the bass notes, which do not seem to present much difficulty when the treble notes are well known.

I would likewise recommend my system of teaching the scales, when the time for them has come. Often and often pupils have answered my question if they had learned the scales, by saying, "I know the sharp scales up to four or five sharps, but I do not know much about flat scales." Some are under the impression that flat scales and minor scales are the same, and of such a thing as a chromatic scale they have never heard. I begin like everybody else with the scale of C major, but inform the pupil about the construction of a major scale, the position of the semi-tones in it, etc. At the next lesson I take the scale with one sharp, then the one with one flat, then two sharps, two flats, and so on, always alternately. I thus go through the whole series of major scales time after time, and I get them known much quicker and more thoroughly than by sticking at the sharp scales only for months and months, as is mostly done. Of course,

the first thing to do is to teach the six sharps and flats in proper order, for which purpose I have made up sentences as follows: "Fretful Children Grumble Daily About Everything" gives the names of the six sharps, and "Before Eating Apples Drink Good Claret" the six flats. The seventh sharp and flat I do not include, as the scales with five flats and five sharps are the same, which I explain to the pupils. I always let them find the scale they are to learn next themselves, by the following rules. To find a sharp scale go a semi-tone higher from the last sharp in the signature. The flat scale begins on the last flat but one in the signature. If there is only one flat the word "Flat" itself gives the key, as it begins with F. When I have gone through the series of major scales, before beginning them again I take a chromatic scale, beginning it on a different keynote every time. As soon as the major scales are fairly well known, I take the relative minor after each major, first only in the melodic form, later on in both melodic and harmonic forms. By degrees I let the scales be played in opposite directions, in thirds, sixths and tenths, with octaves in both hands, and so on, and I let, also, every scale be finished by a cadence. Very early, too, I let the pupils play arpeggios on the common chord of their scales with inversions, later on the chords of the dominant seventh and the diminished seventh. After scales have once been begun I never give a piano-lesson, even to advanced pupils, without taking a scale first in all its directions (and expect my pupils to do the same when they practise), and I also never let a pupil begin a new piece or exercise without telling me first the key and time it is written in. I have hardly ever had a pupil yet, not of my own training, who could tell whether a piece was written in the major, or its relative minor key, because they had not been brought up to it.

Now I have another grievous point to touch upon, that is the great neglect of the different signs or symbols as they occur in the Music. There are first the accidental sharps and flats or naturals, which many pupils will mind right enough where they first occur, but if that note comes again in the same bar they cannot remember it, because their first teacher used to put the accidentals against the notes in pencil. I have had pieces in my hand where repeated accidentals were put in

pencil all over, and also wherever two notes were tied the second one was crossed out. I need not say that I rubbed out these reminders at once, but the harm done cannot be wiped out so quickly. How can a pupil ever learn to play anything correctly without a teacher's assistance if brought up in this way? You would think the ear ought to be the best guide in that, but alas! how many pupils (whose parents would be deeply offended—would simply not believe you, if you said they had no ear for Music) will produce the most awful sound by neglecting accidentals, without their ear seeming in the least disturbed by it.

Then there is the neglect of tied notes, slurs, accent marks, rests, and many more symbols which ought to be introduced one by one, explained, and the pupil impressed with the fact that everything, however small and insignificant looking, has its meaning and must always be minded. I once let a child learn a duet written on purpose to introduce the rest. It was in 4-4 time and every bar began with a minim's rest. I explained that a rest means perfect silence, which can only be attained by taking the fingers right off the keys, and I succeeded in making the child play it in quite the correct way. To my great distress after the holidays, when I played the duet with the child again, she joined all the notes together, as if each bar began with a tied note instead of a rest, and on my remonstrating she said: "Mother told me to do it so, as I sometimes lost my place when I took my fingers off." Judge of my feelings! I could give many more examples of this kind and mention a hundred more things yet, as to the use of the pedal without the necessary knowledge why it is to be left and taken again in certain places, as to the wrong way grace-notes are mostly performed, especially before double notes, how little attention is given to the correct joining of double notes, how wrist exercises are neglected, not to speak of shakes and turns, accent and phrasing, and many more things that ought to have been done and have not been done. I have had pupils who were quite unable to hold down a note or two while playing others, never having played exercises for that purpose (in their early instructions). Even the meaning of some of the most used expressions in Music are not known by many; perhaps they will tell you that Andante means well joined and Legato means quickly.

Of a dotted note there exists only a vague idea that the one note ought to be longer than the other and that a kind of stumble is required there. I am not exaggerating, only giving incidents from my experience, and here I remember just another ugly habit I have met with so many times, the playing of one hand before the other, mostly the left before the right, especially in chords. It is very often done from affectation, and grows into a habit that ought to be strongly condemned by the teacher. But, as I said before, when a better teacher is procured it is mostly too late, the habits have grown too strong, the fingers too stiff and awkward, and the pupil is unwilling to go back to elementary exercises, which are much more difficult for him now than they would have been at first.

Now after all this fault-finding, I will say a word in defence of the teachers, and that is, the want of good instruction-books in England. They mostly give a very few five-finger exercises, followed by the scales (for which I never use a book), then come two or three really easy pieces, but even those sometimes extending beyond the five fingers, and then follow a number of pieces which require passing over and over, double notes and chords and everything the pupil is not ready for. The only merit of these books is that they are cheap. The book I have mostly used (Lebert and Stark, Stuttgart) is not cheap but thorough. It contains in its two first parts everything the pupil will want for years. Plenty of exercises, pieces and duets within the compass of five fingers, then gradually extending over six and seven, but without passing over or under yet; scales and more advanced exercises only begin in the second part. The pieces and duets from the very beginning are pretty and melodious, and the pupil takes an interest in them. The duets especially are exceedingly pretty, made so by the teacher's part being a fine accompaniment to the simple melodies (all original). They are a splendid means for keeping up the pupil's knowledge of the notes and introduce gradually every kind of time and rhythm. The pupil plays alternately the primo and secondo in them, thus getting good practice in the reading of the bass notes too. I have always found that the pupils I have taken steadily through these instructions have turned out good readers and good performers. The only seeming

drawback to this book is that in its English edition the German fingering is retained, but pupils who begin in this fingering do not find this a hindrance, not being accustomed to any other, and later on it is rather an advantage, as now-a-days the best Music is published in this fingering.

I must refrain from saying any more, as I have already overstepped the limits I set myself when I first began. It has long been on my mind to write down my experiences, the faults and shortcomings of young pupils as they come from other hands into mine and the causes of them. If any mother or young teacher will take my words to heart and act according to my hints my aim will be reached, and I am sure they will find the result of their teaching the better for it, and thank me in time to come.

MATHILDE DIEZ.